

Whiti HEREAKA

Extract from the novel *Bugs* (2013)

If you wake up one day and find yourself in a dystopia...

Yes, I do know what a dystopia is, I'm not stupid. And before you say that it is impossible, that somebody would have done *something* to stop it, just think about it. Don't you think that our ordinary world is kinda like the horrors that Orwell and Huxley wrote about? Let me make a list for you: pollution, cameras everywhere, those neighbourhoods where every house looks the same and they lock themselves in behind a big fuck off gate. Everyday, ordinary horror. Except there's no Big Brother to blame here. People did it to themselves. We didn't need a huge war or plague or anything for the world to go to shit. It was just little changes piling up one after the other. People just kept piling and piling until, crash! It all comes down. And you know what we do next? We start a new pile right on top of the old one.

And yes, smartarse, I *have* read those books.

Anyway, so you wake up one day and find yourself in one of those dystopian books; the first thing you need to do is to figure out if it's been written for kids or adults.

If it's for kids, then an overlooked, ordinary person – probably you – will be able to rise and change the world.

If it's for adults...then we're all fucked.

1.

They call me Bugs. As in Bunny.

Yeah, I know. When I started college I tried to change it to Rapeti. Not because I'm a born again Maori or anything, just Rapeti sounds hard. Harder than Bugs anyway. But Bugs stuck. Nicknames, they're kinda like — well y'know Jez, he used to use his snot to put his posters up. He would dig around to find a really big one and then rolls it around in his fingers to make a ball. Better than blu tack he reckons. Cheap too. So that's what nicknames are like – snot on your finger.

So, Bugs. Not because I'm twitchy or can run fast or anything like that. Mum says they call me Bugs because I'm a pest.

Hardy ha, Ma.

It's because of my nose. Or I guess what I do with it – what I *did* with it. When I was a kid, my nose was always running, so I'd sniff. And when I sniffed my whole nose would wrinkle up like a rabbit's...

*Like a Bunny! Hey check out little Bugs here, eh?*

It was probably Uncle that christened me. The couple of things he's good at: nicknames and telling stories. Except he calls them 'jokes'. But Uncle, a joke by definition has gotta be *funny*, eh? Nicknames and stories are what he's good at. Bugger all else.

Even when I stopped sniffing and learnt to blow my nose – *Not on your sleeve, Bugs!* – the name stuck around.

It followed me to school, thanks to my cousins who helpfully corrected the teachers: *It's Bugs, Miss.*

It's made every birthday predictable: rabbits on stationery, rabbits on T-shirts and bloody carrot cake.

I hate carrots. Seriously.

The worst part is everyone thinks they're being so original, like I haven't been here before. But I have to act happy otherwise Mum will clip me around the ears.

Bugs. Bugs. Bugs.

It's tough to be a hard arse when you're a fluffy little bunny.

There's one of the fluffy bastards. There. THERE!

I'm stalking my namesake at dusk in a paddock. I've got this air rifle -- old school, it looks like a .22, it was made back in the day when they didn't have to make them look like toys. If you pump it enough, pump it until it strains against you, a BB can be lethal.

Well, to rabbits.

Line up the sights, breathe in, breathe out and... CRACK! A good clean shot, but the rabbit is not quite dead. So I pound its head with the butt of the rifle. The blood is warm on my hand and I'm sort of high, like really happy. I have this thought, this weird idea that I've killed myself. And I could do it again, and again.

Ding dong, the Bugs is dead!

I'm like a frikkin God, dying and living at the same time. I look at the rabbit's eyes and try to see myself in them, but it's too dark; like the whole world is trying to keep the truth from me. I use its fur to clean off the rifle and my hand and look for a place to stash the body because I don't want to share this moment with anyone yet. It's mine.

Actually, there is *one* person I'd like to share it with - Jez.

It's always been Jez and me. Me and Jez; mates forever. True — we've been friends since kindy, that's how close we are. When we were little we'd be at each other houses playing and stuff. Hide 'n' go seek, Snap, Tiggy... you know, little kid games. Our favourite used to be dress ups. We had this box with all these old clothes – Nan's old dresses and Pop's old Jackets, some gumboots that were the same size but from different pairs so one came higher up the leg than the other, Mum's dressing gown, stuff like that. We'd come home from school and pretend to be pirates or wizards or act out a story the teacher told us on the mat that day. I reckon Jez loved playing dress ups more than me; he liked to be someone else for a while.

One time we were playing Sleeping Beauty and I was Beauty, yeah, I know. So there's me in a dress pretending to be asleep on the bed and Jez is fighting dragons and hacking at roses and it's in the story that he has to kiss me. So he leans over the bed... And because my Mum has the greatest timing, she walks in and freaks out. She calls Uncle in, who has a bigger freak out and starts yelling at Jez, *What do you think you're doing? Get off the bed, Bugs*. Sick fucks. Like little kids know about sex and whatever. Just because there's no such thing as an innocent kiss when you grow up.

I'd seen Jez cry plenty of times before, you know grazing his knee, or that time he fell flat on his face when he was walking along that fence. But no matter what Uncle said, no matter how wild he got – Jez just took it. Stood there like those soldiers on TV man, let Uncle yell and yell and just stood there. That's what Jez is like – solid. Finally Uncle says *Get out of here, both of you*, and Jez takes off. I mean, really sprinting. I run after him but I'm slowed down by the dress – I have to pick up the skirt in big bunches to free my legs. I catch up to Jez and he's already shed his Prince gear. All he says to me is: *Let's not pretend anymore Bugs*.

Yeah, Jez. This one's for you. I take the front paw of my rabbit, like I'm shaking hands — *how'd ya do?* — and feel for the joint with the pad of my thumb. When I feel that slight gap I ease the tip of my pen knife in and the paw comes free into my hand. I wipe the blade on the grass and cover the body with some leaves and stuff. The paw I wrap up in my beanie and shove into my jacket pocket, then I head for the homestead.

Inside, the air is warm and moist from the boil up for tea. It makes my cold nose itch and I wrinkle it and rub it around and around with the palm of my hand. The light in the hall way shows up how useless my

hand cleaning has been – not only is it bloody but it has bits of fur stuck to it too.

You know that joke about the bear and the rabbit shitting in the woods and the bear goes ‘Do you have a problem with shit sticking to your fur?’ and the rabbit goes ‘No,’ and then the bear uses the rabbit for loo paper? Let me tell you that it’s not based in reality *at all*.

‘Bugs, come have your tea.’

‘Just washing up, Nan.’

By the time I’m at the table, I’m squeaky clean and smelling of Palmolive.

Sluuuurp! The pork bones have been cooked so long that all it takes is a little kiss and the meat falls away from the bone. Uncle goes at his tea like he’s giving the pig a hickie – SLURP! Pop and Uncle argue over the tail – the best bit, all fatty and delicious. Pop wins because he always wins. He’s the man of the house. It must gut Uncle, who’s almost forty, to still be considered a boy.

Nan uses the backbones because they’re the sweetest. I pull the bones apart to get to the marrow – this far apart and the pig would be paralysed, a little bit more and it would be dead. I line my bones up on the plate as if they are lego and I can snap the spine back together.

‘Hey Bugs. You catch anything?’

Uncle, never one to miss a jab even if his mouth is full says, ‘Like a townie could catch anything but a cold.’

And I join in with the laughter, because they think they’re laughing at me – but I’m laughing at them. They don’t know that these hands – smeared with pig fat and watercress juice – have held life and death today. They don’t know anything about me.

In the morning the feeling has faded so I go to retrieve the body — no... the *proof*... no, *my* trophy. But bloody Blue has gotten there before me. He’s pinned the dead rabbit flat in front of him underneath his paws and he’s tearing at the belly with his teeth. The skin of the rabbit must be pulling against him because he’s moving his head like he does when we play tug o’ war.

‘Blue. Drop.’

He ignores me. So I give him a kick in the ribs. He doesn’t even move his head, just looks at me side on so that I can see the whites of his eyes and — the nerve of the dog! – growls at me a little.

Normally, Blue growling is not a big deal. He’s like any old man. Pop and Uncle are always moaning about something or other. Blue started complaining as soon as the grey settled in around his muzzle, so he’s always growling.

Maybe it’s the blood that stains his muzzle and his teeth, maybe it’s the spit that drips from his jaw, maybe it’s the little puffs of fur that are being carried away on the wind, but this growl sounds serious.

‘Hope you choke on it, you stupid mutt.’

Whatever. I might have been pissed with him just then, but Blue’s family, y’know? So by the time we’re sitting in front of the fire watching whatever boring show Pop insisted on watching but is now sleeping through, all is forgiven. But when Blue licks my hands and face, I kinda freak out and wonder if he has got a taste for rabbit.

I’m meeting Jez in town. We wait for each other on the benches they’ve got outside on the main drag. It’s a good place to meet, centre of the centre. We tried meeting at the Great Lake Centre a couple of times. Great Lake *Aside*, more like. You can’t watch people drive past there — they just zoom off up State Highway One to somewhere better. Here on these benches you can watch the cars as they cruise past real slow, looking for a park, looking for their mates, or just looking. The best drive-bys are the ones where someone has just got their full license and all their mates are hanging out the windows with the music pumped up loud. Hoping to get stopped because, whatever, they’re *legal* now. The Champs-Elysees has nothing on Horomatangi Street on a Saturday.

I’m feeling all jittery walking down to the bench. I have the whole story planned out so that I’d come off as real hard. I have the paw in my pocket wrapped up in a bandanna - not blue or red, no colours, ‘cos I know Jez is sensitive about that. I’m ready to tell him about the rabbit hunt when I got back into town — the stuff about killing it (not the weird stuff about being a god or freaking out about Blue) - but turns out Jez isn’t really here. I mean, he’s here, sitting on the bench. Sitting on the bench talking to some chick. Sitting on the bench not even noticing when I rock up. Not waiting for me. He’s here, but he’s not *here*.

Jez has the hots for Stone Cold Fox.

Stone Cold. She reckons they call her that because she’s a fox.

Her mouth is too big and her teeth too crooked to be an actual fox. She’s got frizzy hair and skinny legs. So I reckon she’s a Fox in surname only.

Not that it matters to Jez — he’s got a hard on for her. New meat -- I bet everyone’s sniffing around her because she’s the new girl at school. Because you don’t know that she used to eat play dough, you don’t know that she wet her pants at school, you don’t know that she still has a teddy bear or blankie or whatever. You don’t know anything about her. And fuck, that’s pretty sexy. Even if she isn’t.

Jez is trying to act cool, be low key, ‘This is my mate, Bugs.’

‘I better get some Raid then, eh?’

I want to say *No, as in ‘Bunny’* to her, but I know that will just make things worse. So I just laugh along like it’s funny. I look over at Jez — to share a sneer and a ‘that’s-not-even-funny’ eye roll. But Jez is

laughing too, like he actually gets it, like he actually thinks it's funny.

Stone Cold, all right. Not because she's a fox but because she's a bitch.

'So what do you actually do around here?'

She says it in a snooty sort of way, like the town she's stepped into is a big pile of shit. And it's funny because if it was just me and Jez we would be saying just that – *This town is shit, there's nothing to do* – but because she said it, because an outsider said it, we suddenly become, I dunno, proud of our place.

'Aw, there's heaps,' Jez is like those tourist guides except he doesn't have an accent from the northern hemisphere, 'Check out the mountains, if you've got the bucks and a car you could be skiing in a couple hours. Or the lake, you could hire a windsurfer or a kayak if you've got the bucks. Or bungy...'

'If you've got the bucks? What if you don't?'

Man, the chick is ugly but she's onto it. Yeah, plenty to do around here if you have the bucks – problem is, we never do.

'This is what you do?'

We're sitting in a plastic pod thing – y'know, one of those playground things that look like it's from Alice in Wonderland, bright colours and fish eyes for windows. It's out of place here – the park has these big trees planted in straight lines and then there's this thing – a bunch of trippy ass mushrooms sprouting in the trees' shade. I like it here, this is our place – me and Jez. We just sit here and talk shit. Scare little kids away unless their parents have a go. But lately, since we've started to - what do they say? - fill in; we've had a good go at scaring them off too.

It's a bit squashed in the pod. Usually it's just me and Jez but now *she's* here. He's just looking at her, kinda like Blue waiting for a bone, panting and drooling.

'You dumb?'

'Nah, B is smart as – top of the class.'

'I mean, do you talk or what?'

'Talks heaps, funny as. Say something funny B.'

He looks at me and I see Blue again eager for his tennis ball. Begging.

Stone Cold's head is tipped back just a little. She's lifted her pointy chin up barely a centimetre but it is enough so she's looking down at me. Challenging.

It would be now that I can't think of anything to say – when my best mate is hoping I won't make him a liar and some bitch is just waiting for me to fail. Where are my frikkin god powers now?

'This sucks,' she unfolds her twig legs and crawls over Jez's and my feet out of the pod. I feel like I can breathe again now that she's gone, so I'm feeling pretty happy until Jez says, 'Good one B,' and follows after her.

I look at them through the fish eye – she's striding off toward the road and Jez is jogging to catch up behind her. He stops when he is almost caught up, turns back and looks at me. He nods his head and I'm scrambling out of the pod.

Who's like Blue now, eh?

Stone Cold lives near the Intermediate School. We used to walk up this path on the way home and skate – whoosh! – back down at the end of the day. Her place is behind this big hedge, the kind that has red leaves at the tips. Someone has clipped it straight today - there are bits of leaves on the ground, a shock of red against the green grass like glossy drops of blood. The hedge makes me think of those mazes that they have at castles overseas. They say that you can find your way out of the maze if you run your hand along the hedge - just keep following don't lift your hand. I run my hand across the freshly cut surface as I round the gap to the front...

'Far...'

It's a frikkin castle.

Jez lives in a flat, he thinks we're pretty well off – I mean Mum has a job and we have our own house.

But our place is nothing like this. Our place is a little box of a place, a kitset house, something you could buy out of a catalogue plonked in the front of another place just enough room to squeeze down the sides, a metre or so out the back to hang the washing. This place? It is a sturdy square of actual timber with a sweeping semi-circle of windows that look toward the lake.

'Art Deco...'

'What, B?'

'Nothing.'

I couldn't help it. I think it's the surprise at seeing this house, here. It's weird. We used to walk up this street every day for two years with no idea this was here.

I know this is going to sound strange but y'know when you shake up a can of drink heaps and then hand it to someone and wait and wait until they open it and -- WHOOSH! -- as soon as they pull the tab, the drink comes rushing out? That's me. This house has pulled my tab and WHOOSH, I'm bubbling over.

Because if this is here, what else have we missed? We've been walking around and never turning our heads, we've only seen what's straight ahead.

'Are you guys coming in?'

'Do...do we take off our shoes?'

She looks at Jez like he's mental or something.

'No, just come in OK?'

Jez goes in before me. I'm wiping my feet over and over again on the doormat as if poor will flake off like dried mud.

'Far...'

This isn't the kind of place where they'd have scrambled eggs for tea because Pop hasn't killed a beast lately. Bet their meat is wrapped up in plastic on trays.

'Charmaine, is that you? Can you hang out the washing please?'

'Mo-THER! I have friends over.'

'You do? Oh, hello... '

Now Stone Cold's Mum is actually Stone Cold. She's got the same wide mouth but her teeth are perfect - straight straight and white white. She's got curly hair too but hers has been, I dunno, tamed with something so it rests on her shoulders not sticking up around her head like a hedgehog. Although, there are little bits of leaf in it, so I guess she *was* in the hedge. Funny, in a place like this I thought there'd be a gardener. She's wearing tight as jeans so I guess one day Stone Cold will grow into those skinny legs.

I whisper - 'MILF' - to Jez but all he does is jab me in the ribs.

'Hello Mrs Fox, I'm Jeremy. This is...'

'I'm Bugs.'

She pulls off her gardening gloves and shakes our hands.

'Please, call me Shelley. Are you two in the same class as Char?'

I don't know. I missed the first week of term because I was at the farm on 'holiday'. Mum works in hospo - at a hotel that's just become ultra-flash - so holidays for us have always been out of whack with everyone else. Used to be cool when I was a little kid but now spending a week with just family is lame. You'd think the teachers would make a song and dance about it too - but if I guess so long as I've got a note from Mum they don't care if I fall behind.



Jez and Stone Cold are nodding so I nod too. Although if she's in Jez's class she's not as smart as I thought. I love Jez, but he's not the sharpest crayon.

'Are you staying for dinner? I can whip up a frittata...'

'Mum! Just order a pizza, OK? We'll be in the sleep-out.'

'Char, I don't think that's appropriate...'

'God Mo-THER! We're just going to hang out in there, it's not like we're going to have a threesome. Gross.'

I swear that Jez blushes. God, he has no chance against this girl. She's going to crush him just for the fun of it.

Stone Cold takes a packet of marshmallows from the pantry and walks out. Jez follows behind her, but I'm caught in that awkward place where I don't know whose side I'm on – because I'm no fan of Stone Cold, we're not even *friends*; but her Mum is well, her *Mum*. Y'know, *old*.

'Come on Bugs.'

I give Mrs Fox a shrug and follow my 'mates' out of the kitchen. We walk through their lounge to get to the verandah. The furniture in here is old. Not the old that Jez and I are used to, not the stuff that someone's grown out of or doesn't need anymore. This is the kind of stuff that's passed down, the kind of stuff that has history. But I don't have time for a good look because Stone Cold has opened the door already.

'God, you stupid dog.'

On the verandah, standing in our way, is a Doberman. Not a very happy Doberman.

'Jesus, Duke. Quit it.'

Stone Cold picks up a tennis ball from a shelf beside the door. Dogs, eh? Tennis balls are their kryptonite. Everything about Duke is focused on the yellowing ball.

'Get it, Duke.'

Stone cold makes a big show about throwing the ball and Duke sprints off. The dog is all muscle and sleek coat, bred and bred to be like an arrow.

'He falls for it every time.'

Stone Cold puts the tennis ball back on the shelf.

'He'll be hunting for that ball for hours.'

'Pure-bred' eh? Blue, you old mongrel, only your mother knows who your father is but at least you know

when someone is having you on.

Duke is way down the other end of the garden sniffing around the lemon tree for his ball. Yup, the dog is thick all right, like Stone Cold could throw that far. Typical girl, she throws from the top of the shoulder, using her wrist, not the weight of her body to propel it. That's what they mean when they say 'put your back in it'. Yeah, yeah, theory is all good but how about putting it in to practice eh Bugs? Who are you, my PE teacher?

The sleep out is in the Goldilocks zone around the house – far enough to be private, not too far if you've gotta pee in the middle of the night. It looks like a little cottage – big windows either side of the door. Mrs Fox must have been busy around here too, there are these little blue flowers planted under the windows. It has two rooms that open off from the 'hallway' - really it's just big enough to swing the door open and to house a blanket box.

'This is where they lived when the house was being built.'

'Who?'

'My grandparents. No, wait. Great-grandparents.'

'So you're from around here?'

'Sort of. My Dad was in the army so we've been living close to the base.'

'Choice. You've got your own gym.'

In one of the rooms is a whole bunch of gym gear – weights and machines and shit. Jez is on the weight machine pulling more than he should probably to impress Stone Cold. Poser.

'It's Dad's. He likes to keep fighting fit...'

She pretends to karate chop Jez's throat.

Jez lets go of the weights and they pancake back together with a clang.

'He doesn't like me touching his stuff...'

I never knew Jez could move so fast. Usually he kinda slopes around the place. And I'm not saying that as a fancy way of saying walk. He really does slope; he kinda leans way back and leads with his dick. *And look where that's got us?*

'Cool.'

Jez is already in the other room. There is a mattress on the floor piled up with cushions so it's like a low rider couch. On the opposite wall is a big ass TV and stereo. Oh and did I mention the computer that glows with neon like a boy racer's car? What about the X-box, Playstation and Wii, because yes, she has them all.

'Let's fire up a game...'

'Just what I was thinking Jez,' Stone Cold opens the packet of marshmallows, 'But I was thinking old school.'

'Eh?'

'Did you guys play 'Chubby Bunny' when you were kids?'

Like we would play anything called 'Chubby Bunny'.

'It's really easy. You put a marshmallow in your mouth...' Stone Cold does it really slowly and you can tell by the look on Jez's face that he's wishing that marshmallow was... you get the picture eh? R 18, eh,

'And then you say 'Chubby Bunny'. You keep putting marshmallows in until you can't say it anymore. No chewing. No swallowing.'

Jez blushes again. Dick.

Stone Cold waves the packet in my face. I frikken hate marshmallows because I know what they're made of - why don't you just go nibble on a horse hoof? But this is a challenge, this is a test.

'Chubby Bunny...'

Jez is out after three – he cracked up and then swallowed the lot, so it's just me and Stone Cold. Which if you think about it, isn't fair. Her mouth is so big she could fit the whole packet as well as Jez's fantasy and still have room to spare. My mouth is human sized.

'Chubby Bunny...'

Bitch is ahead of me and I know, I know that I can't fit another one in. Worse, the ones I've started with have started to melt and making me gag...

And I've got to get them out because I'm not fucking going to die choking on a marshmallow. So I'm out the door – quick as a rabbit eh, Bugs? – on my hands and knees puking pink and white slime over the blue flowers.

I look up and Duke is in front of me, a lemon is in his mouth. He drops it in front of me, proud that he's found his 'ball'.

And I can't tell if that bitch is laughing at the dog or at me.

DRAFT